

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 141 680

CG 011 501

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 TITLE The Decision to Parent or Not: Normative and Structural Components.
 PUB DATE 76
 NOTE 29p.; Paper presented at the National Conference on Family Relations (October 19-23, 1976, New York, N.Y.)
 EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$2.06 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Decision Making; *Family Planning; Middle Class; Parental Aspiration; Research Projects; *Social Attitudes; *Social Values; *Young Adults
 IDENTIFIERS *Parenting

ABSTRACT

The current study addresses antecedent factors associated with the decision to parent vis-a-vis the decision to not parent. Three interrelated aspects of fertility attitudes and behaviors were examined: (1) the existence of family size norms; (2) the strength of social sanctions regarding family size preferences and; (3) the influence of other socio-demographic and psychosocial factors. Findings were based on cross-sectional data obtained from semi-structured questionnaires administered to a purposive sample of 168 young middle class adults from the midwest. These adults represented two ideal type subgroups: 57 voluntary parent couples and 27 voluntary nonparent couples. Two models for explaining differential fertility outcomes in this population were proposed: (a) the normative model which explains childbearing decisions as the product of social norms and sanctions and (b) the decision-making model which explains family size outcomes as the result of situationally specific experiences. The overall conclusion of this study was that both normative and structural factors influenced fertility outcomes; however, these influences were different for each subgroup. (Author)

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THE DECISION TO PARENT OR NOT: NORMATIVE AND STRUCTURAL COMPONENTS*

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*Revised version of a paper presented at the 1976 meetings of the National Council of Family Relations, New York City, 1976. This paper is based on the author's doctoral dissertation, Purdue University 1976. Data were collected in May-September, 1974.

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THE DECISION TO PARENT OR NOT: NORMATIVE AND STRUCTURAL COMPONENTS

Fertility studies have, traditionally, investigated quantitative, socio-demographic differences between large and small families, ignoring the voluntarily childless family as a legitimate research area.¹ The current study attempts to counteract this selective research bias by focusing on social structural as well as social psychological factors associated with parenthood vis-a-vis nonparenthood.

Before the 20th century in the United States, motherhood was virtually inescapable: fertile women engaging in sexual relations had little or no control over their pregnancies. However, with increased acceptability and availability of effective birth control measures since the 1960s, American couples are technically able to limit their family size to desired levels.

The reality of reproductive control permits childbearing to be a matter of individual or, more appropriately, couple choice rather than chance. Despite the capability of making such rational decisions about family size, major American fertility studies since the 1930s show that most couples still desire (and have) families of two to four children. (Blake 1966, 1972; Commission, 1972; Ryder, 1973; US Bureau of the Census, 1975; Veevers, 1973).

The theoretical framework underlying the current research is the assumption that this widely documented preference among American couples for two- to four-child families reflects a pervasive array of interacting norms and sanctions that act to regulate the number of children that one ought to want and ought to have.

Family size desires, as a category of social norms, are established in much the same way as other kinds of cultural values. It has been argued that

the desirability and inevitability of motherhood is instilled through the socialization process practically from infancy. According to Goode (1970) "a woman is not only taught by society to have a child, she is taught to have a child who will have a child."

Although the literature indicates the existence of a normative range of acceptable family sizes, the specific number of children desired and born to American couples varies systematically by sociodemographic and social psychological factors.

That some Americans depart from the above ideal by having either too few or too many children questions previous assumptions regarding the existence and strength of childbearing norms. Proposing that both normative and structural aspects of differential fertility analysis must be examined, Ritchey and Strokes (1974) in their analysis of 1967 data, present two alternatives for explaining this variation: (1) norms prescribing children are not as universal as previously characterized and (2) the childbearing norm is pervasive, but various structural influences operate selectively to counter the prevailing mores and produce deviance.

Thus, in the current research, two models for explaining differential fertility outcomes observed among 168 young middle class adults are proposed:

1. The normative model which explains childbearing decisions as the product of social norms and sanctions, and
2. The decision-making model which explains family size outcomes as the result of situationally specific experiences.

In order to test the explanatory power of these two theories for the population under study, fertility decisions will be discussed in terms of

1. the stability and change of family size ideals over the life cycle;

2. the presence of social sanctions regarding family size preferences;
and
3. the influence of other sociodemographic and psychosocial factors.

Methodology

The data for this exploratory research were derived from responses to 168 semi-structured questionnaires distributed in late 1974 to a purposive sample of young middle class adults from the Midwest. The sample was divided into two ideal type subgroups: 27 voluntary childless couples and 54 voluntary parent couples. A subsample of ten couples also participated in indepth interviews of their fertility attitudes and behaviors.

Since the total population of nonparents is relatively small (according to current census records [U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1973] only 5% of American married women report intentions to remain childless during their lifetime), nonparent couples for this study were drawn from several sources: (1) distribution of questionnaires by National Organization for Nonparents (NON) Chapter leaders in four midwestern states; (2) direct contact with members of one state chapter and nonparents attending the annual Midwest Nonparent Conference; (3) short-term advertisement in university papers and on bulletin boards, soliciting research participants and (4) word-of-mouth references of potential nonparents.

A comparable group of parent couples, matched in terms of marital status, general age range, socioeconomic status and race, were recruited from a population of parents whose children attended nursery school in one Midwestern university community of 64,000. The sociodemographic characteristics of each subgroup are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

The semi-structured questionnaire includes both fixed choice and open-ended questions measuring adherence to fertility norms, presence of supporting social sanctions, and sociodemographic as well as psychosocial differentials between parents and nonparents. Some questionnaire items were taken directly from, or modified from, previous fertility studies (Clarkson, 1970; Fawcett, 1970; Molnos, 1968; Ryder, 1971; Veevers, 1973b); other non-standard items were constructed for the purposes of this study.

While operationalization of variables is examined in greater detail elsewhere (Ory, 1976) key independent and dependent variables will be discussed briefly. The major dependent variable, parental status, is determined by each couple's current motivational as well as behavioral adherence to fertility norms. For example, the nonparents in the current study neither wanted nor had any children in their present households. Couples represented the unit of analysis for classification. Only couples with congruent parental desires were included for study.

The measurement of the normative structure of fertility attitudes and behaviors, the first major independent variable, is necessarily indirect, as norms are not concrete entities but refer instead to abstract principles governing social behavior. In other fertility studies, the existence of underlying family size norms are inferred from certain behavioral and motivational indices such as the number of children in the average American family or the number of children that the average American couple desires or feels is ideal.

In the current study, respondents' opinions of the number of children thought ideal by most people serves as the criterion measure of dominant family size norms.

Two related dimensions of family size norms were measured: (1) the internalization of family-size decisions; and (2) the stability of family-size preferences.

The internalization of fertility size norms at an early age was operationalized by several retrospective questionnaire items measuring: (1) the desire for children (at some time in the future) during childhood; (2) the degree of activeness (active, passive or default) of fertility decisions; (3) the nature and extent of premarital fertility decisions; and (4) the timing of current fertility decisions.

The stability (and pattern) of child bearing desires was indicated by a series of nine items recording family size preferences at each of the following life stages: (1) childhood; (2) high school; (3) engagement; (4) marriage; (5) soon after marriage; (6) a few years after marriage; (7) after the first child; (8) after the second child; (9) at the present. The structuring of this variable provides a simulated developmental orientation that enhances an otherwise "static" cross sectional research design.

Two basic questionnaire formats were used. Perceptions of others' stereotyping of couples with "deviant" family sizes were measured by open-ended projective questions such as "most people think couples who decide to remain childless are" Individual stereotyping of nonparents vis-a-vis parents was operationalized by asking respondents to compare their expectations of couples without children to couples with children in terms of whether the childfree couples were (on the average): more, less, or no different than couples with children with respect to selfishness, religiosity, responsibility, sexual activity, marital happiness, maturity, community activity, naturalness, femininity, masculinity, and the presence or absence of mental problems for wives and husbands. The positive direction of each of

these 12 traits represents Veever's (1973a) delineation of the traditional social meaning of parenthood.

The strength of social sanctions enforcing normative family sizes was measured by the extent and type of (1) social stereotyping of couples with "deviant" family sizes; (2) expected societal reactions to one's desired family size; and (3) perceptions of social pressures to conform to socially defined ideal family size preferences.

The structuring of the questionnaire items, as well as the selection of the sample population to include both parents and nonparents, permits an analysis and comparison of the following self-other attitudes: (1) nonparents' views of parents' attitudes toward nonparents; (2) parents' perceptions of others' attitudes toward nonparents; (3) parents' actual evaluations of nonparents vis-à-vis parents; and (4) nonparents' evaluation of themselves vis-à-vis parents.

Sociodemographic and social psychological factors posited as having a primary influence on family size attitudes and behaviors have been operationalized, for the most part, by standard, closed-ended questions and will not be described in detail here. For the purposes of this study, variables were grouped according to whether their primary occurrence was in the family of orientation or the family of procreation.

An emphasis was placed on variables which measure the respondent's, particularly the female's, experience with and attitudes toward extra-familial roles. The operationalization of one key psychosocial measure, identification with sex role stereotypes, will be discussed briefly. This scale consists of responses to a subset of self evaluative items adapted from a stereotype questionnaire developed by Rosenkratz et al. (1968).

In the current study, respondents were instructed to rate how they

viewed themselves (by circling the appropriate number) on a series of 30 bi-polar adjectives. The following sample items illustrate the format of this scale.

not at all competitive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7 very competitive
very tactful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7 very blunt

Each pole has been previously judged in terms of its characterization of stereotypic sex role traits as well as its social desirability.

In addition to being a measure of sex role identification, self ratings on this scale reflect two dimensions of self concepts. Stereotypic male-valued traits such as being rational, independent, confident, not easily influenced by others, and competitive, are labeled as a "competency" cluster. Failure to incorporate these qualities into the self concept is characteristic of the stereotypic "incompetent" female.

On the other hand, stereotypic female-valued traits such as being tactful, aware of the feelings of others, and able to express tender feelings, are labeled as a "warmth-expressive" cluster. The relative absence of these traits, especially for women, characterizes a "cold" personality.

Findings

A. Family Size Norms

Implicit family size norms are indicated by the existence of commonly shared American family size ideals. That the majority of respondents (95.7% of parents and 94.5% of nonparents) feel most people's family size preference would be two or three children gives support to the position that American family size desires reflect a general consensus about the desirability of having children.

During childhood, no significant qualitative differences in future parental desires were found. For the majority of parents as well as non-parents, the desire for children was internalized at an early age. Only 4.4% of the parents and 11.1% of the nonparents expressed an early preference for remaining childless.

Additional analyses showed that the nature and timing of fertility decisions was significantly related to parental status. As indicated in Table 2, 92.5% of the nonparents' vs. 62.9% of the parents' fertility decisions were characterized as active as opposed to passive.

Table 2 about here

The distribution of responses in Table 2 also shows that nonparents tended to make later decisions. Whereas nonparents were less likely than parents to make early decisions (5.6 vs. 25.7 at stage 1), they were more likely to make post-marital decisions (50.0 vs. 32.4 at stages 6 and 7).

In addition to measuring the timing of current fertility decisions, respondents' mean fertility ideals were graphed over nine life stages. As displayed in Figure I, there are certain similarities between parents and nonparents' family size ideals: (1) in the early stages, a majority of parents, were desirous of children; and (2) for both populations, there was a continuous decline, throughout the life cycle in the number of children thought ideal.

Figure 1 about here

Although parents and nonparents have some general developmental trends in common, the graph shows that there have always been quantitative differences between parents' and nonparents' ideals and that these differences widen at each progressive life cycle stage. Two discernable patterns emerge:

(1) parents' mean family size desires were larger than nonparents; at every life cycle stage (from $\bar{x}$ 3.4 in childhood to 2.4 at the present and from $\bar{x}$ 2.5 to 0.0, respectively); and (2) parents' mean family size preferences were always within the normative two to four child range while nonparents' childbearing desires only fell within the normative range in childhood and high school ($\bar{x}$ = 2.586 at childhood and $\bar{x}$ = 2.073 at high school).

However, the relationship between parental status and fertility decisions must be qualified by sex and age of the respondent. In contrast to nondifferentiation among males during childhood and high school, parent and nonparent females' childbearing preferences are significantly different. The differentiation between females but not males may be due to the effects of a more intensive socialization toward parenthood for females combined with more realistic opportunities for females than males to weigh the desirability and undesirability of parenthood.

Furthermore, the finding that older respondents do not hold significantly different premarital family size preferences, while young respondents tend to differentiate themselves as prospective parents or nonparents prior to marriage suggest a change from the traditional patterns of becoming childless. Older nonparents are more likely to reach their fertility decisions through a series of postponements to have children throughout the early years of marriage, whereas younger nonparent couples, who were married within the last five years, are more likely to enter marriage with the mutual understanding that neither partner wanted children.

B. Social Sanctions

Nonparents are generally aware of unfavorable reactions to their family size preferences: 83% expected unfavorable reactions. Nonparents also feel pressure to conform to the "socially acceptable" ideal of two to three

children. Pressures from family, friends, co-workers, and even strangers were of two types: proscriptions pushing away from childlessness, and prescriptions drawing toward having children.

An examination of respondents' perceptions of others' attitudes toward childless couples reveals a widespread application of social sanctions proscribing childlessness as undesirable. As shown in Table 3, the majority of parents and nonparents alike feel that the dominant attitude toward childlessness is negative.

Table 3 about here

Although the majority of responses represent negative characterizations (73% for parents and 86% for nonparents), some interesting between-group differences emerge. Aside from the primary characterizations of childless couples as selfish, parents focus on what such couples were missing or that such couples were simply committed to ideologies or goals incongruent with having children. In contrast nonparents feel that others would be most likely to question the mental state of childless couples or label them as immature.

In addition to their judgments of most peoples' attitudes toward childless couples, respondents were also asked for their perceptions of differences between childless and parent couples in terms of the 12 traits described in the preceding methodology section. Although these 12 traits represent the traditional social meanings of parenthood (Veevers 1973a), most respondents did not attribute characteristic differences to nonparent vs. parent couples. As seen in Table 4, nonparents were, on the average, more likely than parents to differentiate couples on these variables: 41.6% of the nonparents vs. 21.1% of the parents reported some difference.

Table 4 about here

Yet when stereotypic differences were reported, nonparents were more likely than parents to define childlessness in positive terms. An average of positive responses over all 12 traits shows that 39% of the nonparents, compared to 7.8% of the parents, characterized voluntary childlessness positively. Nonparents were especially likely to view childless couples as more responsible, mature, more happily married, and having fewer mental problems.

The data in this section indicate that not only were negative sanctions against childlessness prevalent, but that in most cases nonparents were quite aware of pronatalist pressures.

Yet the presence of childbearing norms and reinforcing sanctions did not alter the nonparents' fertility decisions. It can be hypothesized that nonparents' discrepancy between perceptions of others' labelling and self-labelling is one technique by which nonparents nullify the effects of prevalent social pressures to have children. These findings support speculation by Veevers (1974) that nonparents defend their variant belief system and insulate themselves from perceived and real social pressures by "discrediting the discreditor" through a redefinition of the social meanings of parenthood.

Spontaneous comments generated by nonparents reveal some other methods by which they handle pressures to parent. A common method was just to ignore such pressures:

I feel pressure to conform constantly from family, friends, society in general. Everything is geared toward "mothers." I just let people talk now and although the pressure is apparent it doesn't bother me at all.

This feeling was seconded by another commonly reported attitude: If one's mind is made up, all pressure is meaningless.

Other nonparents indicated that they countered such pressure by

minimizing social contacts with parent friends and seeking new friends among the childfree.

The National Organization for Nonparents was characterized as one organization which provided such peer support. About two thirds of the nonparents sampled were members of this organization. The two most frequently reported benefits from this organization were: (1) support and acceptance for one's own decision to remain childfree and (2) a forum for providing support and reinforcement for others contemplating a childfree lifestyle.

C. Other Social Structural and Psychological Factors

The third area of analysis focused on an investigation of any systematic differences between parents and nonparents' early and/or current life experiences which might facilitate or impede adherence to family size norms. Although most relationships between sociodemographic and psychosocial variables were not significant ($P < .05$), many differences in the predicted direction were found.

Nonparents' early background experiences differed from parents' with respect to: (a) family position ($P < .05$); (b) childcare responsibility ($P = .06$); and (c) work histories and attitudes of sample wives' mothers (ns).

Although first borns were overrepresented in both populations (37.2% of the parents and 37.0% of nonparents), there tended to be more only children among nonparents (25.9 vs. 16.8) and far fewer last borns (5.6 vs. 21.1). Additionally, mothers of nonparent females tended to be more involved in, and more likely to set a model for, working outside of the home. Their children were also more likely to have some childcare responsibilities (excluding children with no siblings, 62.9% of parents vs. 24.1% of

nonparents had no experience at all.

Parental status differences in family-of-procreation variables were also found with respect to: (1) religious attitudes and behaviors ($P < .05$) and (2) wives' employment status ($P < .05$). Nonparents were much more likely to: (1) consider themselves nonreligious (59.3% vs. 31.8%); (2) rarely attend traditional religious services (51.9 vs. 30.1% said they never attended) and (3) declare themselves as atheists or agnostics (33.4% vs. 16.2%).

This finding that nonparents hold significantly fewer traditional religious attitudes and engaged in fewer religious behaviors than parents reflects a rejection by nonparents of dominant American religions whose doctrines have been characterized as traditionally pronatalist in nature.

As predicted, nonparent wives were more likely than parent wives to be currently employed (92.6% of nonparents and 57.9% of parents were employed). Furthermore, nonparents also tended (ns) to have had premarital work experience, to be currently engaged at slightly higher occupational levels and to be working for primarily noneconomic, self-rewarding motivations.

The existence of a strong negative relationship between labor force participation and fertility found in this study, as well as most other fertility studies, suggests that the work sphere provides women with enriching life experiences and nonmaternal sources of gratification which tend to compete with fertility desires.

It was also hypothesized that nonparent wives would be more likely than parent wives to have less stereotyped gender role concepts. However, incorporation of sex role-related self concepts (as measured by Rosenkratz and associates' scale described in the preceding methodology section) was not significantly related to parental status. Surprisingly, although female

nonparents were more likely than their parent counterparts to be employed or aspiring to advanced educational degrees, they were no more likely than parent females to view themselves as more "competency-oriented."

However, this lack of significant difference between sex role identification and parental status can also be seen as highly significant in providing evidence to challenge the popular folklore about pathological sex identification of nonparents. In the current study, nonparent females were no more or less likely than parent females to identify with socially desirable warmth-expressive characteristics typically labelled "feminine." Similarly nonparent males were no more or less likely than parent males to incorporate socially valued competency traits typically labelled masculine.

General Conclusions

General conclusions relating to the existence of, and interrelationships among, these three major fertility variables will be summarized briefly. First, the existence of family size norms, in a purely statistical sense, was clearly supported by a widespread consensus of two to three children as the ideal American family size.

However, the implication of this finding must be interpreted within the context of two basic assumptions guiding this research: (1) the clustering of ideal family sizes around a traditional two-to-four child family (or the contemporary two-to-three child preference) is reflective of underlying family size norms and (2) family size norms are inextricably linked with, and thus identified by, the presence of social sanctions regulating fertility outcomes.

The findings presented in the second part of the analysis (Section B) demonstrate the widespread application and perception of social sanctions prescribing the two-to-three child family as ideal and proscribing the childless,

one-child or large family as undesirable.

Thus enforcement of the two-to-three-child family by social pressures pushing conformity to a "socially" defined ideal family size gives credence to the previous assumptions that family size ideals, in addition to reflecting mere statistical regularities, are indicative of an underlying normative system which specifies the number of children a couple should desire (and have).

It is interesting to notice the effect of the current "two is ideal" message promulgated by those concerned about overpopulation. Traditionally four to five children represented a loosely enforced upper boundary of tolerable family sizes. In the current sample of middle class educated couples, the upper limits of acceptability were clearly defined as more than four children. However, many respondents perceived that any more than two or three children were too many.

The findings in the first section of this analysis (Section A) also provide evidence for the utility of normative or decision-making models for the explanation of fertility outcome. The author has suggested that both normative and decision-making fertility behaviors seem to be operating, although to different extents, in each population.

The observations related to the timing and nature of fertility decisions reveal that, for the majority of parents, the qualitative desire to have (or not have) children was an unquestioned assumption made early in life and thus can be best characterized by the normative model. However, parents' reasons for their fluctuation of family size desires within the two-to-four child range indicate that quantitative fertility decisions were often determined by situationally specific concerns made in a more or less active decision-making framework. In contrast, nonparents' fertility desires can best be viewed as

the product of a more or less active decision-making process in which the pros and cons of having children were considered apart from dominant normative restrictions.

Whereas sections A and B of this analysis provided an indication of the presence of pronatalist norms and reinforcing social sanctions, Section C was devoted to an examination of the effects of sociodemographic and psychosocial factors on fertility outcomes. The purpose of this third section, in conjunction with the first two, was to test the creditability of Ritchey and Strokes' (1974) two alternative proposals for explaining childlessness:

- (1) childbearing norms are not so universal as previously thought and
- (2) childbearing norms are pervasive, but various structural influences operate selectively to counter the prevailing mores and produce deviance.

The failure to find many significant differences between traditional sociodemographic variables and the more recently identified intervening role variables weakens the creditability of the second proposal.

However, the dearth of significant differences might be explained, in part, by the relative homogeneity of the sample populations and/or the crudity of measurement instruments. This interpretation is supported by the finding that, although most differences were not significant, many differences in the predicted direction existed between parents and nonparents and particularly with respect to variables reflecting female experience with nonmaternal roles or models.

However, another interpretation of these findings might be that the lack of differentiation between parents and nonparents reveals an easing of social sanctions enforcing normative behavior. In light of the failure to fully support Ritchey and Strokes' (1974) second proposition of between group structural variations, the validity of the normative structure as a major

explanatory factor was re-evaluated.

Closer examination of the findings provided mixed support for the first proposition that childbearing norms are becoming less prominent. On the one hand, nonparents' perceptions of as well as the tendency of "others" to apply widespread pronatalist social pressures suggested a perpetuation of childbearing norms. However, parents' own reluctance to stereotype childfree couples provided some evidence for a weakening of norms proscribing voluntary childlessness.

That each alternative proposition receives partial support argues that both normative and structural considerations should be considered in any study of fertility differentials, and particularly those involving "deviant" parity levels. Two problematic issues emerging from these propositions should be mentioned: (1) How can nonparents' perception of negative social stereotyping be reconciled with parents' failure to attribute stereotype characteristics to the childless couple vis-a-vis the parent couple? and (2) If pronatalist norms are weakening, will there be a rise in the acceptance and adoption of childfree lifestyles?

In addressing the first issue, one must recall the potential gap between attitude and behavior and between the "definition of the situation" and the actual situation. Thus, it is possible that there was a marked discrepancy between sample parents' willingness to admit having stereotypic attitudes and behaviors and their actual "gut-level" feelings toward, and everyday interactions with, intentionally childless couples.

This interpretation was supported by parents' spontaneous comments on the questionnaire as well as in the in-depth interview situation. These comments revealed that although the majority of parents defined childlessness as no different from parenthood with respect to 12 social and psychological

characteristics, many really thought that people without children were missing out on one of the most rewarding experiences in life and would be sorry later.

The gap between others' application of social stereotyping and non-parents' perception of and experience with pronatalist pressures might also be explained by examining nonparents' own attitudes and behaviors. In the face of diminishing but persistent pronatalist social pressures, the committed nonparents in the current study have developed several mechanisms for legitimizing their alternative lifestyles. In fact, there is some evidence for the speculation that nonparents might actually be reinforcing, or even creating, negative social pressures by (1) isolation from parents; (2) close association with other nonparents and (3) redefinition of the social meanings of parenthood. Thus, the above findings suggest that nonparents' fertility decisions are not a-normative but that voluntary childlessness was supported by adherence to deviant subcultural norms.

The issue of whether childlessness will be more popular in the future is also problematic. In the United States, the percent of married women between the ages of 18 to 24 who expect to have no children seems to have remained fairly stable since a marked increase in 1967 (U.S. Bureau of The Census, 1973).

However, there are several current trends in American society which give credence to the position that voluntary childlessness will be considered a more respectable lifestyle in the future: (1) there is a tendency toward greater tolerance of a diversity of marriage and parenthood styles; (2) with the women's liberation movement there is a debunking of the "motherhood mystique" and subsequent support for alternative roles for women; (3) the National Organization for Nonparents is currently providing psychological and social support for those contemplating nonparenthood and (4) the concern

about overpopulation is legitimizing the decision not to parent. However, there are certain social trends which indicate that parenthood will not be forsaken in the near future.

First, for most people, having children involves intrinsic rewards which cannot be explained away by a purely economic assessment of the utility of having children in a post-industrial society and second, the greater tolerance of a diversity of lifestyles suggests a coexistence of multiple norms about parenthood which allows for (1) traditional motherhood norms, (2) a compromise combination of motherhood and employment roles, and (3) a radical exclusion of the motherhood role in favor of non-maternal roles.

There are several important implications of this trend toward a coexistence of childbearing norms. It is the author's contention that less social pressure to conform to a restrictive fertility range will help avert (1) frustrations of unprepared parents who marry and have children because it is expected of them; (2) stigmatization of those who defy, whether intentionally or not, pronatalist norms; and (3) nonparents' tendency to counterattack such labelling by "discrediting the discreditors."

However, one must also be aware that the effects of greater tolerance are not always beneficial: coexistent norms permit the freedom to decide but such freedom also includes the anxieties and responsibilities of having to make crucial fertility decisions without support of clearcut normative constrictions.

Unfortunately, this study is not broad enough to make definitive statements about the beneficial effects of having (as vs. not having) children on the individual, the marriage, the family, or the society at large. However, the current findings provide limited support for the conclusion that personal adjustment (as measured by one's self concept in a sex role context) is not

dependent on either a childfree or parenting lifestyle.

Secondly, the social acceptance of voluntary childlessness has implications for national population policy. It is the author's contention that the recurrent argument of whether such policies should be voluntary or mandatory can be bypassed by encouraging zero parity as a legitimate fertility choice.

Table 1
Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Sub-Population Groups

Variables	Population Group			
	Parents		Nonparents	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
a. <u>Age</u>				
22 - 29	50.9	58	79.6	43
30 - 36	49.1	56	20.4	11
	$\bar{x} = 29.47, \bar{x} = 27.24$			
b. <u>Education Level</u>				
High school	1.8	2	5.6	3
Business school or some college	5.3	12	20.4	11
College	35.1	40	24.1	13
Masters	20.2	23	22.2	12
Ph.D.	32.5	37	27.8	15
	$p = .19$			
c. <u>Income Level</u>				
\$9,999 or less	8.8	10	18.5	10
\$10,000 - \$14,999	46.5	53	7.4	4
\$15,000 - \$24,000	35.1	40	44.4	24
\$25,000 +	9.6	11	29.6	16
	$p = .0000, G = .36$			
d. <u>Occupational Level</u>				
Professional, semi-professional, top and middle management	60.4	69	59.2	32
Clerical and small business and sales	10.5	12	13.0	7
Skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled	2.7	3	7.5	4
Unemployed	26.3	30	20.4	11
	$* p = .37$			
e. <u>Work Situation</u>				
Full-time worker	49.1	56	55.6	30
Part-time worker	14.0	16	11.1	6
Student	15.8	18	29.6	16
Unemployed	21.1	24	2.8	2
	$p = .01, C = .35$			

* Does not include unemployed category.

Table 2
The Nature and Timing of Fertility Decisions
by Current Parental Status

Life Cycle Stages	Percent of Population Reporting First Fertility Decision at Each Life Cycle Stage			
	Parents (N = 105 ^a)		Nonparents (N = 54)	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
No active decision	25.7	27	5.6	3
Childhood	3.8	4	3.7	2
High School	4.8	5	5.6	3
Engagement	12.4	13	33.3	18
At marriage	9.5	10	0.0	0
Soon after marriage	9.5	10	9.3	5
A few years after marriage	22.9	24	40.7	22
Affected by accidental pregnancy	11.4	12	1.9	1

p = .0002, C = .55

^a 9 parental responses were lost to don't know, no response categories.

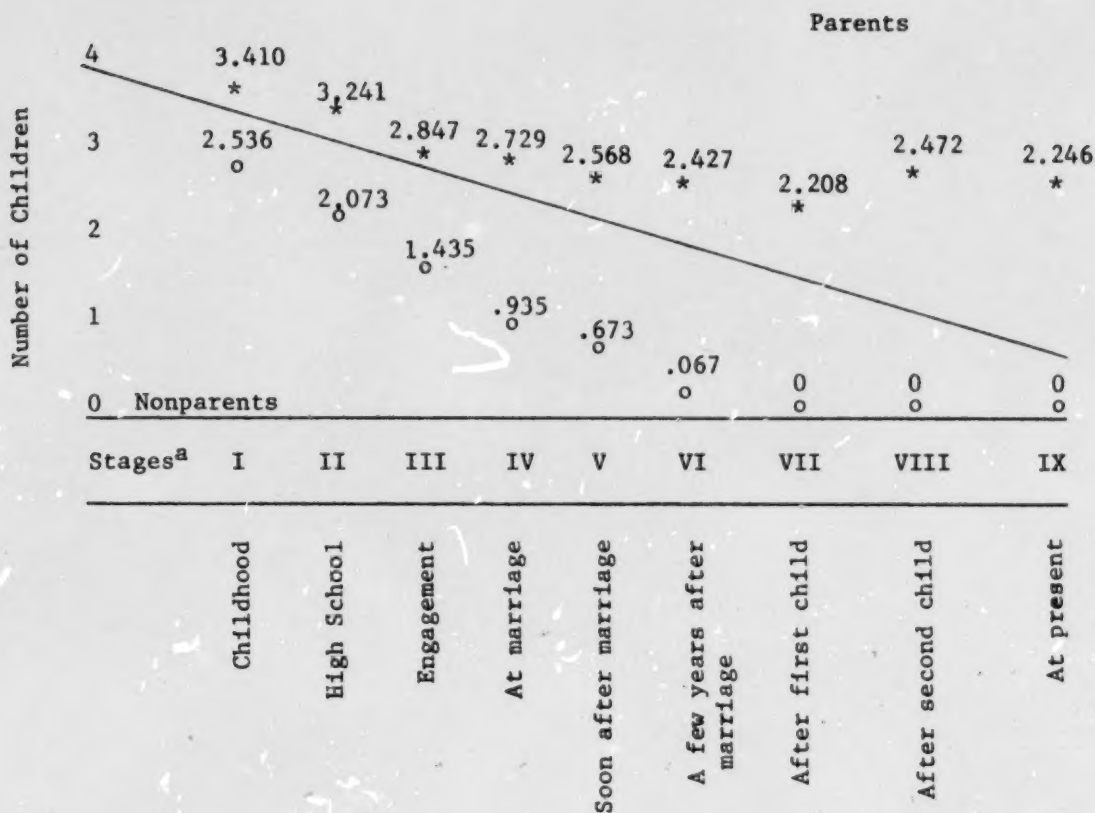


Figure I
Mean Number of Children Desired at Each Life Stage

Table 3
Responses to Open-ended Question: "Most People Think That Couples
Who Do Not Plan to Have Any Children Are" by Parental Status of Respondent

Responses	Parents		Nonparents	
	Percent Over Total Number of Respond- ents (N=112)	Percent Over Total Number of Responses (N = 146)	Percent Over Total Number of Respond- ents (N=47)	Percent Over Total Number of Responses (N = 91)
<u>Negative Opinions</u>				
Selfish	42.8	32.9	68.1	35.2
Non-conforming	3.6	2.7	8.5	4.4
Immature	7.1	5.5	25.5	13.2
Sterile	8.9	6.8	12.8	6.6
Of a questionable mental state	12.5	9.6	29.8	15.4
People who dislike children	1.8	1.4	6.4	3.3
Missing out	16.1	12.3	8.5	4.4
Characterized by general negative qualities	1.8	1.4	8.5	4.4
Total Negative	94.6	72.6	168.1	86.9
<u>Positive Opinions</u>				
Characterized by general positive qualities	5.4	4.1	14.9	7.6
Total Positive	5.4	4.1	14.9	7.6
<u>Neutral-Nonjudgmental Attitudes</u>				
Committed to ideologies or goals incongruent with having children	9.8	7.5	0.0	0.0
Characterized by nonjudgmental or refusal to stereotype responses	20.5	15.8	10.6	5.5
Total Neutral	30.3	23.3	10.6	5.5

Table 4
Stereotypic Labelling of Intentional Childlessness
by Parental Status of the Labeller

Traits	Percent Defining Childless Couples as "No Different Than" Parent Couples		Percent Defining Childless Couples as More Positive Than Parent Couples	
	Parents ^a	Nonparents ^b	Parents	Nonparents
1. Selfishness	52.6	70.4	2.6	14.8
2.* **Religiosity	71.1	63.0	0.0	3.7
3. Responsibility	75.4	40.7	5.3	55.6
4. Sexual Activity	81.6	49.1	13.2	50.9
5. Marital Happiness	80.7	29.6	7.9	70.4
6. Maturity	72.6	50.9	2.7	49.1
7.* **Community Activity	61.4	45.3	25.4	41.5
8. **Naturalness	52.6	74.1	0.0	1.9
9. Femininity	80.5	64.2	8.8	35.8
10. Mental Problems for nonparent wives	73.5	47.2	12.4	50.9
11. Masculinity	91.2	71.7	2.6	26.4
14. Mental problems for nonparents husbands	77.0	47.2	13.2	52.8
No difference $\bar{x}$ 78.9		58.4	Positive $\bar{x}$ 7.8	39
Some difference $\bar{x}$ 21.1		41.6	Negative $\bar{x}$ 92.2	61

^a N = 114

^b N = 54 for categories 1, 2, 3, 5 and 8; N = 53 for categories 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11 and 12.

* Non-significant differences ($p = >.05$).

** Non-significant differences ($p = >.05$) with "no different than" responses eliminated.

Footnotes

¹Notable exceptions to this selective research bias include Bram, 1975; HouseKnect, 1974; Ritchey and Strokes, 1974; and Veevers, 1973c.